

A. O. Kotlomanov^{1,2}

“NEW BRITISH SCULPTURE” AND THE RUSSIAN ART CONTEXT

¹ Saint Petersburg Stieglitz State Academy of Art and Design,
13, Solyanoy per., St. Petersburg, 191028, Russian Federation

² St. Petersburg State University, 7–9, Universitetskaya nab., St. Petersburg, 199034, Russian Federation

The article examines the works of leading representatives of the “New British Sculpture” Tony Cragg and Antony Gormley. The relevance of the text is related to Tony Cragg’s recent retrospective at the Hermitage Museum. Also it reviews the circumstances of realizing the 2011 exhibition project of Antony Gormley at the Hermitage. The problem is founded on the study of the practice of contemporary sculpture of the last thirty years. The author discusses the relationship of art and design and the role of the financial factors in contemporary art culture. The text is provided with examples of individual theoretical and self-critical statements of Tony Cragg and Antony Gormley. It makes a comparison of the Western European art context and Russian tendencies in this field as parallel trends of creative thinking. Final conclusions formulate the need to revise the criteria of art theory and art criticism from the point of recognition of new commercial art and to determine its role in the culture of our time. Refs 5. Figs 7.

Keywords: Tony Cragg, Antony Gormley, New British Sculpture, Hermitage, contemporary art, contemporary sculpture.

«НОВАЯ БРИТАНСКАЯ СКУЛЬПТУРА» И РОССИЙСКИЙ ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННЫЙ КОНТЕКСТ

A. O. Kotlomanov^{1,2}

¹ Санкт-Петербургская государственная художественно-промышленная академия
им. А. Л. Штиглица, Российская Федерация, 191028, Санкт-Петербург, Соляной пер., 13

² Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет,
Российская Федерация, 199034, Санкт-Петербург, Университетская наб., 7–9

Анализируется творчество ведущих представителей «Новой британской скульптуры» — Тони Крэга и Энтони Гормли. Актуальность текста связана с недавним проведением ретроспективной выставки Тони Крэга в Эрмитаже. Также, в материале рассматривается с критической позиции проведение в 2011 в Эрмитаже проекта Энтони Гормли. Постановка проблемы опирается на изучение практики современной скульптуры последних тридцати лет. Автор рассуждает о взаимосвязи искусства и дизайна, роли финансовых технологий в современной художественной культуре. Приводятся примеры индивидуальных теоретических и самокритических высказываний Тони Крэга и Энтони Гормли. Проводится сравнение западно-европейского и российского контекстов искусства как параллельных тенденций творческого мышления. Итоговые выводы формулируют необходимость пересмотра критериев в искусствоведении и художественной критике с позиции признания нового коммерческого искусства и определения его роли в культуре нашего времени. Библиогр. 5 назв. Ил. 7.

Ключевые слова: Тони Крэгг, Энтони Гормли, Эрмитаж, Новая британская скульптура, современное искусство, современная скульптура.

The State Hermitage Museum in March — May 2016 held an exhibition of Tony Cragg, one of the leading representatives of the “New British Sculpture” movement. This show has designated certain tendency of collaboration of Russian museums with contemporary British artists. Not so long ago the Hermitage held displays of the same generation of sculptors with Anish Kapoor (2010) and Antony Gormley (2011–2012). And the second of them gave not just his sculptures show, he undertook an ambitious project of

re-exposition of two Hermitage halls of ancient art whilst at the same time presenting his works there.

Cragg's exhibition was a retrospective that differed little from similar exhibitions of his works in other museums and galleries (Fig. 1–2). However, this artist is not well known to the Russian public and therefore it is easy enough to present it as a classic, worthy to be represented in the halls of a respected museum. In order to understand the motivations of the organizers, we will quote one of them, Dmitry Ozerkov:

We are not saying that this he a classic: he is a classic of contemporary art. This artist was born when Picasso, Bacon, Matisse were still alive, and it is holy for him. Their pictures hang in the room next door. This is a continuation of art movements after the wars, revolutions, the Caribbean crisis, after the Falklands... The historian sees in his work the historical allusions of a religious man — the complex fate of church thought in these years, an emotional person — the plight of the people. A variety of thoughts arise in us, but they are all our own. And the task of the artist is to enable us to turn this on so that we do not start thinking about what screensaver we have on the phone and whether to buy milk for the evening, but about something else. And for that, in fact, the state preserves museums as storehouses of culture to not go into the hustle and bustle of everyday life as have the people. Museums preserve culture, and culture is not static. And contemporary art is the next stage of culture [1].

In the same vein, the artist selection is explained by Anna Trofimova, curator of the project “Antony Gormley. Still Standing: A Contemporary Intervention in a Classical Collection”:

Why did we choose Antony Gormley? Everybody asks me this question. Well, because he is a good sculptor, an outstanding sculptor, at least from our point of view. His qualities as an artist and the quality of his sculptures strongly appeal to us, not only in the sense that we are connoisseurs, curators and keepers of antique sculpture, but also because our galleries are ideal for sculpture. Any sculpture would look its best in our galleries and I think that at the Antony Gormley exhibition everyone can feel very good and easy [2].

Let us comment these statements. Their meaning is that it is not necessary to explain anything, all is clear, since these artists have gone down in the history of art. And the fact that they exhibited in the Hermitage, and can even convert a museum exposition, should not cause any contradiction, though these sculptors, like all other well-known representatives of contemporary art, are contradictory and ambiguous. That they are really famous for their works of the 1980s — 1990s, does not mean that they are indisputable classics whose work is coordinated with the main trend of the historical development of art. What is the “classicism” of Cragg, Gormley, Kapoor and other representatives of “New British sculpture”?

The answer to this question must be sought in the peculiarities of the psychological perception of the art process, when everything new quickly begins to be perceived as already familiar. When, by virtue of a certain fatigue, we recognize that the establishment of a work is objectively justified.

The pace of development of cultural phenomena in the 20th century was going so fast that certain trends became a kind of tradition (classic) almost immediately after going out of fashion. There was a reflection on the past stage, on the basis of which new creative concepts were created. So it was with the radical manifestations of artistic thinking of the 1960s and 1970s, which became, as it turned out later, the origins of the new conceptualist



Fig. 1. Tony Cragg. Sculptures and Drawings. 2016. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg



Fig. 2. Tony Cragg exhibition. 2015. Lisson Gallery, Milan

art idiom. A major role in this history was played “New British Sculpture”, a generation of artists who gained prominence in the 1980s. Today, they are perceived by a separate “school”. Tony Cragg, Anthony Gormley, Bill Woodrow, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor and other representatives of the “New British Sculpture” conceptualized sculptural material that became in their work an essential element of form and meaning.

“New British Sculpture” entered the art history as an important stage of the approval of a new paradigm of art form the installation. In general, trends in British sculpture of the 1980s and 1990s were aimed at enhancing the potential opportunities of sculpture and the conceptualization of its meaning. These trends were different from similar phenomena of American and European continental art by their individualized character. Common to this period of sculptural themes was the problem of landscape, space and objects in space, history and communication. These were addressed by British sculptors in the form of conceptual compositions, which represent these themes in accordance with a deep intellectual tradition.

Thus the works Gormley, established in the context of the city or nature, transform public space into a kind of stage where natural and architectural landscape is perceived as decoration. Where the personal space for phantom statues, preserving the typical shape of a stylized human body, a visual metaphor of the body in general, acquires various modifications of the spatial context of conceptual meaning (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Sound II. 1986. A. Gormley. Winchester Cathedral

The figures Gormley used in his many installations are based on plaster casts from the body of the artist. Usually they are covered with metal sheets; while maintaining the scale of individual figure, where all the individual features are smoothed. Thus, these plastic figurations simultaneously retain the presence of the author and are perceived as abstract physical objects. According to Gormley (quoted from Andrew Causey’s “Sculpture since 1945”), his work is ‘to make bodies into vessels that both contain and occupy space’

[3, p.252]. The inner content of these 'vessels' is a cast of the individual body, covered with a kind of protective armor. The 'occupying' of the surrounding space occurs in the composition of these body modules with different objects or elements of the environment.

Gormley's works turned into the inner world of man, and associated with the author himself. They are personified, and at the same time universally summarized. Gormley does not inform his works narrative quality, and creates, in the words of Edward Lucie-Smith, "symbolic stereotype" [4, p.107], conveying the idea via meager metaphorical means.

A special feature of the British installations (in the works by Tony Cragg, Bill Woodrow, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Antony Gormley) is, on the one hand, the attention of the authors to the purely artistic problems and, on the other, a symbolic and metaphorical way of organizing concept in the form. In this system, the elements of the overall structure are understood as universal modules of variable meaning.

All this is important for the perception of the "New British Sculpture" in a historical context, if we to keep in mind their relatively early works of the 1980s and 1990s. Towards the 2000s, these artists have become little distinguishable from other commercially successful representatives of contemporary art. Each of them is a conceptualist in his own way, and it is not an objective advantage, this is what it goes without saying.

Conceptualist qualities of contemporary artists, their real and imaginary achievements enable them to make public statements, a kind of sermon on the topic of what is painting, sculpture, architecture, and the like, how they understand the aims of the contemporary artist, art history and, finally, their own creativity. That is, they do the work of art historians and critics by explaining in advance, using the discourse necessary to talk about them. This is not a phenomenon of recent times; famous figures of culture have always had similar qualities. But now, for some reason, the statements of famous artists are not only not criticized, they are generally not even analyzed. Like some authority of theoretical thought whose ideas were for contemporary art critics something of a religion with a particular language for the adepts.

In one of his interviews Tony Cragg expressed some thoughts on the meaning of contemporary sculpture and his role in its recent history. It is an important fact that Cragg has engaged in a kind of design for more than twenty years that fashions streamlined objects of traditional materials and of those that are used in industry.

His works, since 1990s, have a seemingly abstract shape. But from a certain point of view, you may notice that the silhouette of the sculpture acquires a definite outlines. Then again, the sculpture becomes abstract. Such methods in objects that resemble the forms of industrial production, it is very good for interior decoration. They do not suggest any meaning, remaining beautiful objects that appeared to us as if from a different reality.

In this respect Cragg is very reminiscent of Anish Kapoor, whose works represent an abstract beauty without certain connotations (Fig. 4). Production of such objects it is possible to reduce to the industrial method. On their surface, one cannot see the work on the material, they are pure visual ideas appearing in perfect shape, made by computer techniques. As if by industry, this is a kind of supreme substance, capable of creating a super-idea in the material. And in the case of Cragg and Kapoor these beautiful objects and installations represent some 'luminous emptiness', both tangible and inaccessible to us. All this seemed to repeat the purism idea of an ideal object made by machine with the person only at the design stage: 'These works are not realities, they're fictions. They're my



Fig. 4. Leviathan. 2011. A. Kapoor. Grand Palais, Paris

own fantasy and the basis for them is my emotion about the form I'm making. [...] That's very easy technology, and there are lots of programs through which you can actually move one form onto the other.'

At the same time, Cragg seems to hesitate to talk about a computer method for creating sculptures, recognizing that there is something dangerous. The artist in him still rebelling against the designer, although this dialectical struggle still leads to victory of design thinking: 'I think now is actually an interesting point in time because, in a sense, whatever photography was for painting in the middle of the nineteenth century, computers might be for sculpture today. [...] If you're looking at welded steel sculpture of the fifties, you're still only looking at works that are made accumulatively out of industrial material and in an industrial format. So you're using that industrial format, which is utilitarian reality. We're back to the same point, of blinding and limiting our reality, and so I wonder if the danger of using sophisticated computer tools for making sculpture is that we might end up with the same thing. There is a real danger of formatting things like sculpture, because formalization is an expedient of the utilitarian production systems which produce the whole of the boring sub-standard industrial reality around us' [5].

In 2011 during the Antony Gormley project at the Hermitage (Fig. 5–6) there was organized discussion that brought together some St. Petersburg art historians and art critics, who all listened together to the 'great' English artist. Gormley spoke as if he embodied the whole of contemporary sculpture, as if his work has a universal dimension, objective and absolute. Here is an excerpt from his 'sermon':

The plinth is an acceptance that the space of art is both literally and metaphorically higher than the space of life. I would say that life is always more valuable than any materialised ideology. [...] These ancient works have been brought back into the level field of shared existence, to share the space of thinking, feeling, moving bodies.[...]

I have decided to return to the language of early Modernism not in order to do a mechanistic job, nor in order to answer certain formal questions but to see how you can apply the language of Modernism to the body (the body that we have to remember that



Fig. 5. Antony Gormley. Still Standing: A Contemporary Intervention in the Classical Collection. 2011–2012. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg



Fig. 6. Antony Gormley. Still Standing: A Contemporary Intervention in the Classical Collection. 2011–2012. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

Modernism in the end rejected). [...] I want to bring back the language of Modernism, apply it to the body in order to find an abstract body and discover what emotions are possible by making this marriage. The Hermitage is not a bad place to do it. There were certain practical challenges to do with these objects being massive and solid enough to submit themselves to the kind of walkthrough by the public that is normal in the Hermitage but for me and most interestingly, the philosophical challenge is to go back to the beginning of this divergence of high art from the social and look again at this primary trajectory [2].

“The Hermitage is not a bad place to do it” — how can such a thing can be said? Who is he to talk as if his sculptures (or even just ideas) were creations at a universal level? They are so important that even a great museum for them is only ‘not a bad place’. Probably, the English artist still has the conviction that Russia is some sort of wild country, where by a strange twist of fate there are some significant museums. Could he say the same thing in the Louvre or in the British Museum, among sophisticated French and English audiences? We doubt. Here as if everything is possible, that, unfortunately, was confirmed by the public, do not even question the relevance of such a project in the sacred halls of the Hermitage.

Fortunately, not everyone in Russia is so primitive, although there is the other extreme. Russian artists and cultured people in general are not particularly aware of contemporary art. It’s hard to say whether this is good or bad. Still, it is recognized that the paradigm of Russian culture and art is a special phenomenon.

The Russian art world is different from the Western context. Russia has its own history of art associated with the meaning understood only in this country. In the context of globalization, of course, many national peculiarities are blurred, but one must understand that there are impulses that can not lead to some kind of common denominator. They come from the depths of people’s souls, and make us speak the same language, use the same concepts. The understanding of art in Russia is directed to the search for meaning in a clear form.

The abstract discourse of form is understandable in the Russian context, but what is much more important is the intuitive perception of the content in the forms. Of meaning that is expressed like a literary work. The Russian context, for historical reasons, denies the division of art history of the 20th century into modernism and postmodernism. Also, in a Russian context, there is no special sense to talk about their own concept of form creation; rather it is necessary to talk about ideas that can excite a large number of people.

The Russian perception of art is committed to finding great ideas and confirming these ideas in the language of art. That is why realism is still so popular in Russia where art and its problems of pure form are avoided by the copying of reality. Perception is directed directly towards the sense that has the distinct advantage of this method of artistic expression.

Now in Russia exhibitions of old and new realistic art are held with great success. The public is drawn again to what was rejected against the people’s will. There is a certain negative connotation because realistic art can also take commercial forms. But here appears a significant counterargument. The focus of the Western art in the direction of peculiar design has an even more appreciable commercial flavor. Art should not deceive the viewer, and must not be created solely for the purpose of obtaining benefits.

Therefore, we need clear laws of the relationship of form and meaning, and the patterns that are understandable to people. An individual artistic statement becomes public

when the artist begins to show his work a wider audience. So it does not really matter what he thinks about his own work and much more important what the public sees in his works. It is particularly significant which thoughts arise in the audience in the perception of works of art.

If you arrange an exhibition in a museum, known for its classic collections, you must take into account a certain tradition, and to submit to its logic. You have no moral right to actively intervene in what is the result of work of generations of artists and museum professionals. You have to be extremely correct, ideally you should abandon exposure in a museum, such as the Hermitage, the Louvre or the Prado. You have to earn the right to be represented by alongside the works of great artists. As in the case of exposure you are doomed to an experience of the comparison, and this comparison is clearly not in your favor.

In Russia, the traditional context of art perception remains significant. It is more good than bad. It is better to do nothing than to do something harmful. Therefore, any exhibition of contemporary art in the Hermitage will be unsuccessful. This will be result of a compromise of two paradigms. One seeks to reform the reality, and the other calls for the preservation of what is there, because the new does not mean better.

Sculpture as an art of three-dimensional expression has in its nature the factor of an active intervention in reality. Characteristically, Russian sculpture had some limited growth, in contrast to the painting that directed to an illusory perception and thinking. Even the most successful sculpture is an object alien to reality because of its artificial nature. Creating an art object contradicts the logic of natural development, especially when the art objects become too much. Precisely this situation is observed in contemporary art, crowded by those who call themselves artists and works whose quality is similar to the quality of industrial products.

Industrial character is a common feature of the works of the sculptors here analyzed. Despite the fact that they represent the best examples of three-dimensional art of the last thirty to forty years. And yet, even in their case, we must admit that we are seeing what are more likely design objects than unique works of art.

In any work of art should be sincere expression. Therefore, true works of art may not be much; otherwise it will be something like industry. Exposing industrial products is an unlikely task for the classical art museum. So, we must admit that the recent exhibitions of the "New British Sculpture" representatives resemble the shows of commercial products. The same can be said about other heroes of the contemporary art scene, from Damien Hirst to Gerhard Richter. All this is the business with varying degrees of success.

That which Cragg and Gormley are now engaged in, is an art which is universal in terms of its decorative features. Kapoor creates something similar in terms of meaning. You can also recall an outstanding example of Jeff Koons, skillfully playing on the taste preferences of the public. The polished surfaces of his objects monumentalize ordinary things giving them the status of grand art (Fig. 7). This dubious aesthetics Cragg and Kapoor interpret in a semi-abstract form. As for Gormley, his figurative installations have long been an outstanding example of the self-repeat, when the works themselves can no longer be adequately perceived by the viewer. They have become the sign of Gormley's presence in a particular area. That is, for example, why he spoke at the discussion at the Hermitage. He needs a 'benefit performance' in order to confirm that it was he, and that his words have meaning.



Fig. 7. Balloon Dog (Magenta). 1994–2006. J. Koons. Palazzo Grassi, Venezia

Thus, the artist confirms his place in this world, it confirms his status, and ultimately uses all for theoretical statement. It also uses the status of well-known museum, and there are also important mercantile interests. As a result, we see the synthesis of politics and commerce masquerading as art. Expression of personal ambition, combined with the benefits to those who allows the artist carry out a project. It is has nothing to do with the history of art but functions as theoretical thought and art criticism. Because of this, the reasoning of contemporary artists around his work is not particularly original.

Obviously, Tony Cragg, Antony Gormley and Anish Kapoor towards the 2000s moved from artistic exploration to implementing personal strategies where attempts to make history were closely linked with the receipt of a material benefit. It is clear that exhibitions of these artists may only be carried out in commercial spaces otherwise reasonable questions might be raised about the true meaning of these projects.

'New British Sculpture' at the latest turn of its history shows a very interesting example of a commercially successful, ideologically calibrated conceptualism. In this sense, it compares with the achievements of 'Young British Artists'. The common point is also the fact that it makes no sense to think of either of these two phenomena in terms of art criticism; it is a matter of business strategy. It would be wiser not to analyze the work of these artists, because every mention of them can be interpreted from the perspective of PR and publicity. In the commitment to be objective, we must admit that these examples are only interesting as symptoms of the crisis of contemporary art. By themselves, as works of art, they have long been of no interest to analyze.

References

1. Pochemu nuzhno uvidet' novye formy Toni Kregga v Ermitazhe [Why must see the new forms of Tony Cragg at the Hermitage]. *Fontanka.ru*. 2016. March 1. Available at: <http://calendar.fontanka.ru/articles/3475/> (accessed 21.05.2016). (In Russian)

2. *Sculpture in the museum and beyond: round table discussion*, September 22, 2011. Available at: <http://www.proarte.ru/en/events/sculpture-in-the-museum-and-beyond-round-table-discussion/> (accessed 21.05.2016).

3. Causey A. *Sculpture since 1945*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988. 304 p.
4. Lucie-Smith E. *Art in the eighties*. Oxford, Phaidon, 1990. 127 p.
5. *Tony Cragg interviewed by Jon Wood*. Available at: <http://www.tony-cragg.com/texte/Tony%20Cragg%20interviewed%20by%20Jon%20Wood.pdf> (accessed 21.05.2016).

For citation: Kotlomanov A. O. “New British Sculpture” and the Russian art context. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. Series 15. Arts*, 2016, issue 3, pp. 38–48. DOI: 10.21638/11701/spbu15.2016.303

Статья поступила в редакцию 10 мая 2016 г.

Контактная информация

Kotlomanov Alexander O. — PhD; kotlomanov@yandex.ru

Котломанов Александр Олегович — кандидат искусствоведения; kotlomanov@yandex.ru